

Telling Stories Together : a collaborative technology-based curriculum project for an endangered language community

Introduction

This curriculum project is an exercise in computer-assisted language learning that aims to maximize L2 learning through task-based, constructivist uses of Web 2.0 tools. Skehan (2003: 407) asserts that “it is essential that actual computer interaction is seen by learners as a stage to something else, rather than an end in itself”. This project gives students the opportunity to collaborate on and produce a physical artifact, meaning the language practice (and use of technology) in which the learners engage will be both motivated and focused. This template includes two sets of parallel activities. For each set, students work together to brainstorm, illustrate, write, edit, and publish a story. One set directs students to record native speakers retelling stories they know in their language, while the second develops a new story from the students’ own life experiences or imaginations.

This project is purposefully designed to be both low-cost and accessible. All of the tools used are free to anyone with an internet connection. The only costs incurred are the final printing costs of the texts and the purchase of a portable digital voice recorder. The easy access of the web tools and the relatively small amount of direction and equipment needed ensure that communities who do not yet have formal language-learning classrooms can also utilize this project with relative ease.

Many communities who fit this intended design have a very small pool of potential language learners. This curriculum project takes this into account by employing activities in which learners at every level can take leading roles.

This project is designed around the framework for online pedagogies laid out by Bower et al 2010: 182-184 (see Pedagogical framework below). The technologies in this design make use of all four of the categories in the framework at various stages in the process, moving towards higher-order learning as students become both more technologically and more linguistically skilled.



1. *Laying the foundation: The pre-write*

Students record or collect aural stories using the online audio recording and streaming tool **SoundCloud**.

2. *Co-constructing ideas: Illustrations*

Students use **Flickr** to find images under Creative Commons license to illustrate their chosen story

3. *Collaboration and practicing linguistics: Writing*

A collaborative **Google Doc** enables students to transcribe or write creatively together.

4. *Task-based language practice: Editing and revising*

Tasks are divided up, tracked, and shared using the online tool **Todoist**.

5. *Literacy and corpus development: Publishing*

Students self-publish their manuscript using **Lulu**.

Pedagogical Framework

Transmissive	Dialogic	Constructionist	Co-constructive
In preparation for the project, in training students on audio recording technologies, and in introducing learners to each Web 2.0 tool at each step in the project, teachers will be engaged in a “stream of information... broadcast to learners.”	The pre-writing step (Step 1) of this project will center around “discourse between participants” with “periods of activity and feedback” coming (in the form of text comments) from peers during the asynchronous audio brainstorming sessions.	The writing step (Step 3) specifically focuses on language learning through cooperative development of a product (i.e. written texts).	In the final two steps of the project (Steps 4 and 5), the learners will “complete a series of goal-related tasks” (in the Edit/Revise step) “to produce an artifact” (in the Publishing step.)

Conclusion

Yamamoto identifies “the creation of language materials that are easy to use” and “the development of written literature, both traditional and new” (quoted in Crystal 2000:144) among his nine factors for maintenance and promotion of small languages. Literacy in a minority language enhances the language’s prestige, offers opportunities for engagement with language in a meaningful way, and balances the educational parity of linguistic majority and minority students (Grenoble & Whaley 2006). This project, therefore, empowers young learners to be active language revitalizers, not just through their own acquisition of their ancestral language, but also through development of materials that contribute to the literary corpus of their community.

This project, in fact, has two clear goals. One of these is relatively short-term, i.e. the production of two new texts. But the other clear goal underlying and pervading every aspect of this project is the maintenance and revitalization of the ancestral language. This, of course, is a daunting task, and might seem overwhelming to young learners and to the people who teach them. It is hoped that this curriculum project will contribute not only to these students’ immediate language learning but also to the community’s longterm language success. King (2001:213) notes that revitalization efforts have many fringe benefits for communities; just by implementing a project such as this one, language teachers can change the “overall ‘cultural climate’ of the community”. Just as SoundCloud, Google Docs, and other Web 2.0 tools each play a specific role in the completion of this project, it is hoped that this project itself can be one of many useful tools at the community’s disposal for linguistic reclamation.

Bibliography

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